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ABSTRACT

In addition to giving pertinent historical background, this document describes the current educational system in Sweden. Specifically described are reform efforts since World War II; responsibilities of the federal, county and municipal governments; features held in common by schools in the municipalities; organization and curriculum of compulsory and upper secondary schools; and structure and training of school staff. School administration and finance, curriculum, school year schedules, marks and examinations, and the organization of the school's work are described for both compulsory and upper secondary schools. Other features of Swedish schools discussed include the following: emphasis on practical working life orientation throughout schooling; bilingual programs for immigrant children; foreign language instruction; remedial teaching for children with academic or socially related school difficulties; free activity periods (sometimes organized within an integrated school day); students' option of delaying enrollment in upper secondary school; the right of employee organizations to influence school decisions; and the youth guarantee (which guarantees educational and vocational training for youth between the ages of 16 and 18 who are neither attending upper secondary school nor permanently employed). (CB)

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Primary and Secondary Education in Sweden

When the general process of educational reform and democratisation started in Western Europe during the 1940s, Sweden had only seven years' compulsory schooling. Non-compulsory schooling was divided up into a host of different schools. There were great differences between urban and rural communities, and conditions could also vary a great deal from one town or city to another.

When, after many years of official research and enquiry, the process of reform got seriously under way in about 1950, organisational changes were carried through rapidly, with the result that Sweden now has a compulsory comprehensive 9-year school, an integrated upper secondary school designed to accommodate all 16-year-olds, a system of municipal adult education enabling adults to acquire the same primary and secondary education as young persons, and a higher education system which in principle is open to everybody with qualifications corresponding to two years' upper secondary schooling. All children are also entitled to pre-school education for at least one year before starting school at age seven. The pre-schools are, however, part of the public child care programmes and do not belong to the regular school system. Pre-school education, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools are run by municipal authorities, but the costs involved are shared between municipalities and the State. There are very few private schools. Higher education is entirely State-run.

The rapid organisational reform of municipal schooling, however, has not been matched by an equally rapid transformation of working methods and routines. The curricula, which apply equally throughout the country, contain exacting demands concerning the development of school work, requiring it to be adapted to the individual needs of pupils, so that each and every one will have an opportunity of acquiring at school the knowledge and skills which are most beneficial to his or her personal development and the best possible foundation for employment, private life and participation in the life of the community subsequently. These requirements, however, have not been combined with consistent measures concerning training of teachers and other staff, the development of teaching materials or the apportionment of powers between central and local authorities. It was not until the close of the 1970s that more consistent measures were taken in these respects and also concerning the utilisation of State grants, the framing of the curricula, responsibility for development work and in-service education and training.

State and municipality—shared responsibilities

The guidelines and basic regulations governing Swedish schools are highly centralised. Consequently, uniform schools and educational standards have been established throughout the country. School legislation is passed by Parliament, which also decides the funding of schools. The Government issues the Education Ordinance and lays down general guidelines for school work in accordance with the Compulsory School and Upper Secondary School Curricula.

Below Government level, central planning, drafting and implementation are the responsibility of a special authority, the National Board of Education (SÖ). Apart from long-term planning of a general nature, the Board's foremost tasks include ensuring that the goals laid down for the school sector by Parliament and Government are actually achieved, evaluating school activities continuously on the basis of local and regional reports, ensuring that research is undertaken and encouraging local development work at municipal level. Another very important task of the Board is its continuous curricula development work.

Every county in Sweden has a county education board appointed by the State. Within its geographical boundaries, this board has practically the same type of planning and drafting duties as the National Board of Education at national level. The county education board attends to direct contact with schools. It offers support and advice in matters relating to school work and in-service education and training. It is also a supervisory authority and has to intervene if necessary to take corrective measures. In addition, the county education board appoints headmasters and directors of studies of municipal schools. Its activities are funded entirely by the State.

In Sweden's 280 or so municipalities, it is the duty of the local education committee, a political body appointed by the municipal council, to ensure that activities materialise, i.e. that schools are built and sufficient facilities otherwise provided, that the activities of schools in the municipality are co-ordinated, that teachers and other school staff are hired, that municipal funds are allocated for school activities, that the State grant is used as intended, that the goals laid down in the curriculum are achieved and that the general guidelines are complied with.

School management was heavily centralised while the present system was in the process of being built up. Both general guidelines and detailed directions for the conduct of work were issued by national authorities. Since the end of the 1970s, decision-making powers have been increasingly delegated to individual municipalities and schools. Most decisions are made at school level and based on consultations between headmaster, staff and pupils. Similarly, the money at the disposal of the local education committee is divided between the schools and disbursed by them. In practice it is the responsibility of the local education committees to ensure that Swedish schools, in spite of the decentralisation, maintain their uniformity and that equivalent standards are upheld in different municipalities and parts of the country.

Finance and benefits

The running costs of primary and secondary education are shared between the State and the municipalities, approximately on a fifty-fifty basis. The law does not allow tuition fees to be charged in compulsory schools, upper secondary schools or municipal adult education. Teaching materials in compulsory schools, similarly, are free of charge to the individual. School meals and school transport are generally also provided free of charge for compulsory school pupils. Where voluntary forms of education are concerned, a municipality may impose a charge for school meals and leave the cost of teaching materials to be borne by the students themselves. In most municipalities, however, meals and books are free of charge also to upper secondary students, and often the same applies in adult education as well.

Pupils attending compulsory school qualify for basic child allowance. Upper second-

ary school students receive study assistance. The latter comprises a general study grant, representing a continuation of child allowance and payable to all students from the age of 16, and a needs-tested grant towards the cost of studies and daily travel.

Schools in the municipalities—features in common

The municipal school system comprises compulsory comprehensive school, upper secondary school and municipal adult education, which forms part of upper secondary school but is often separately organised. All schools are co-educational and all study programmes are accessible on equal terms to persons of both sexes.

Curricula

It was emphasised already in 1950, when Parliament decided to introduce the 9-year compulsory comprehensive school on an experimental basis, that school work would have to be reformed on a continuous basis. This continuous process of reform was intended to ensure adjustment to new demands and to new knowledge concerning pupils' needs. It was to be partly manifested by an ongoing review of curricula, which from the very outset were framed at central level.

Centrally framed curricula have succeeded one another ever since 1962, when the experimental 9-year compulsory comprehensive school was established on a permanent basis. The earlier compulsory school curricula contained detailed directions on school work, subject by subject. The curriculum now in force, Lgr 80, lays down goals and guidelines of a general nature. It also includes time schedules specifying the number of periods per week at each level (a level comprising three grades) for each subject. Individual teaching subjects are covered by syllabi in which the subject matter is divided between the three levels. The distribution of the periods specified in the time schedule and of the stipulated subject matter of the various teaching subjects is left to the individual school to decide. Lgr 80 puts a great deal of emphasis on training the pupils in basic skills—reading, writing and arithmetic—all the way through school. Similarly, a great deal of attention has to be paid to supplying the pupils with a basic knowledge of civics, natural science and technology.

There is also a centrally framed curriculum for upper secondary school. The 1970 curriculum now in force is subject to a continuous process of revision. New lines (i.e. study programmes) have been added and the syllabi have been revised.

Adult education used to follow the same curricula as compulsory and upper secondary school. The experience accruing from about 15 years' adult education has now been fed back, however, into a separate curriculum for municipal adult education which entered into force in 1982. (See Fact Sheet FS 64, Adult Education in Sweden.)

School year and terms

The compulsory school and upper secondary school year comprises 40 weeks divided into two terms. The autumn term starts on about 20th August and ends just before Christmas. The spring term starts around 10th January and ends on about 10th June. There are two short holidays during the spring term, each lasting one week, viz. a winter sports holiday in February or March and the Easter holiday. Schools have a five-day week, from Monday to Friday inclusive.

Marks and examinations

There are no examinations in compulsory or upper secondary school. No marks are awarded for the first seven grades of compulsory school, but awards are then made at the end of each term in grades 8 and 9. Marks in upper secondary school are awarded on a termly basis. Compulsory schools inform parents of their children's progress and difficulties by means of interviews. Interviews of this kind can also occur in upper secondary schools.

Marks are awarded on a five-point scale, one being the lowest and five the highest award obtainable. These marks are relative, i.e. they refer to the average national level of achievement in each subject.

Marks are, however, a controversial issue. The pupils' representative organisations want them to be abolished altogether, and so too do many teachers, especially in compulsory schools.

A compulsory school leaving certificate qualifies the school leaver to apply for upper secondary school, irrespective of the optional subjects taken at the senior level of compulsory school. An upper secondary school leaving certificate awarded after at least a two-year line of studies including a specified amount of Swedish and English confers general eligibility for higher education. In addition, the various post-secondary study programmes have special entrance qualifications expressed in terms of upper secondary school subjects and, in some cases, job experience.

The continuous evaluation of school activities forms an important task of local education committees and schools. Compulsory schools have no centrally compiled tests measuring the achievement of individual pupils, but for certain subjects there are standardised achievement tests which can be used to measure the achievement of a class or school compared with the country as a whole. Upper secondary schools have centrally compiled achievement tests in certain subjects.

The county education boards have an important part to play in the evaluation of upper secondary school activities. Through visiting experts and the provision of further subject studies for teachers, they help to maintain the uniformity and equivalent standards of upper secondary schools throughout the country.

Educational and vocational orientation, practical working life orientation

One of the distinguishing features of Swedish schools is their focus on working life. Instruction concerning the local employment sector is provided already at junior level by representatives of working life. The pupils go on field trips to workplaces in the locality and also visit their parents at work. At the intermediate and senior levels of compulsory school, this instruction is broadened in the various teaching subjects, at the same time as visits are arranged to workplaces of various kinds. A great deal of educational orientation is provided in upper secondary schools, with a view to the students' subsequent studies. Vocational orientation is concerned both with the labour market as a whole and with individual sectors. Field trips refer to the students' specialities.

During their compulsory schooling, pupils must complete at least six and up to ten weeks' practical working life orientation. At senior level this takes the form of work experience weeks at various workplaces. The pupils' choices of practical work experience must be combined in such a way that boys become acquainted with occupations where women predominate and girls with those where men predominate.

An increasing amount of practical working life orientation is being organised in the theoretical lines of upper secondary school. Where the vocational lines are concerned, contacts with working life are an integral part of teaching.

Special councils, known as SSA councils, are attached to the local education committees to encourage co-operation between schools and the employment sector. These councils comprise representatives of schools and of local employers and union organisations.

Immigrant education

Roughly one million out of the total national population of just over eight million are immigrants or the children of immigrants who have come to Sweden since the end of the Second World War. Both children and adults in Sweden having a mother tongue (home language) other than Swedish are entitled to be taught Swedish as a foreign language. This instruction is provided at pre-school level as well as in compulsory and upper secondary schools. Where adults are concerned, it is often provided by adult education associations or else as a part of municipal adult education.

Compulsory and upper secondary school students, like pre-school children, are also entitled to be taught their mother tongue. This instruction is particularly intensive in pre-school education and the junior and intermediate levels of compulsory school, but it is available all the way through school to those who want it. Home language instruction is usually arranged off the timetable. In municipalities with large immigrant populations, however, entire classes can be arranged for children with home languages other than Swedish. In this case, all teaching for a number of school years will be in the children's home language, at the same time as they will be taught Swedish with a view to eventually entering Swedish-speaking classes. Immigrant children at the senior level of compulsory school can take their home language as an optional subject, thereby receiving instruction within the time schedule.

Compulsory school

Elementary school in Sweden takes the form of a compulsory, 9-year comprehensive school. School is compulsory for children between the ages of 7 and 16. Compulsory school is divided into three levels, viz. junior level, intermediate level and senior level, each of which comprises three school years (grades). All pupils take the same subjects at junior level and intermediate level. English is compulsory as from grade 3 or 4. It is not until they reach senior level that the pupils are offered a limited range of options in the form of optional subjects for three or four periods per week and school year and, secondly, two alternative courses of English and mathematics respectively.

A second foreign language—French, German or home language—always has to be included among the optional subjects offered. Roughly two-thirds of grade 7 pupils opt for French or German. So far very few pupils have opted for their home languages. In addition to French, German and home languages, it is up to the local education committees themselves to decide what optional subjects are to be offered. Locally determined options of this kind are subject to the stipulations that they must be suitable for both boys and girls and must not be associated with any traditional sexual bias. They may not constitute further studies of a particular school subject either. Instead they have to include items from several different school subjects or items quite unrelated to curricular subjects.

Children attend school in their local area. Municipalities provide transport to and from school for children having to travel long distances, either in the form of special school transport or by means of bus or train season tickets.

There are junior and intermediate level schools in every housing area. Most of them have one or two classes per grade, making between 150 and 300 pupils altogether, but schools can be both larger and smaller. In isolated rural areas, a single class can be made up of pupils from two or three different grades.

Senior level grades are housed in larger schools with anything between 150 and 600 pupils and with two, three or more classes per grade.

State grants for compulsory schools are distributed at junior level with reference to a certain number of teacher periods for every partial or complete unit of 25 pupils, the corresponding unit at intermediate and senior levels being 30 pupils. Schools themselves decide how large classes are to be. Pupils must be kept together in the same classes as far as possible, all the way from grade 1 to the end of compulsory school.

At municipal level, compulsory schools are divided into school management districts. As a rule, every such district includes several schools and either all three levels or junior and intermediate levels only. The headmaster is head of a school management district and is assisted by a director of studies responsible, under his authority, for the educational direction of school activities.

The work of compulsory schools

School work has to be organised in such a way that two or more classes, from the same or different grades, constitute a working unit. In addition to class teachers or subject teachers, each working unit is allotted remedial teachers and pupil welfare specialists, e.g. a social welfare officer, psychologist and school nurse. The staff of a working unit constitute a working team, and together they plan, carry out and follow up the work of the unit. The pupils take part in the entire working process, planning and evaluation included.

Every school has a local working plan, based partly on the curriculum and also on local priorities.

Remedial teaching

Children with special needs are assisted primarily by means of co-ordinated remedial teaching. Pupils having difficulty at school are taken care of by a remedial teacher attached to the working unit, either in the classroom itself or, sometimes, in a special "clinic" department. If this co-ordinated remedial teaching is not enough, small separate groups can be organised for short periods, though never for more than one term. The special day school is another form of intensive assistance for children with difficulties. This arrangement is used for the temporary care of children with serious, and above all socially related school difficulties.

Adjusted courses of study are another form of assistance. In this way the pupil can devote extra time to certain subjects while temporarily omitting others. Senior level pupils with adjusted courses of study can work away from school one or two days every week. The purpose of all remedial teaching and other assistance to pupils with special needs is to return them as soon as possible to normal schooling together with their classmates.

Free activities and the integrated school day

The curriculum provides for free activities at both intermediate level and senior level for a certain compulsory number of periods. Free activities are designed to put children in touch with associations and activities outside school and to encourage them to develop their initiative and creativity and perhaps in this way to lay the foundations of lifelong interests.

Many municipalities have introduced an integrated school day. This means that free activities are organised over and above the provisions of the curriculum and made to alternate with teaching throughout the school day. Where younger children are concerned, the integrated school day is often organised conjointly with leisure time centres, while in the case of older children it involves co-operation with youth recreation centres, public libraries, municipal schools of music and associations of various kinds. The integrated school day is the common concern of all municipal boards responsible for public arrangements on behalf of children and young persons. The various staff categories collaborate. The facilities, mostly adjoining schools, are pooled.

Compulsory-school subjects—periods per week (ppw) at different levels

	Jr.	Int.	Sen.	Remarks
Child studies	—	—	1	The apportionment of ppw between the three grades of each level is determined locally.
Art education	—	6	5	[1] May be transferred to intermediate level, with 2 ppw of Swedish or another subject being transferred from intermediate to junior level.
English	2[1]	10	9	[2] General subjects at junior level also include art education and handicraft (up to and including grade 2).
Home economics	—	1	4	[3] Including 2 ppw technology.
Sport	6	9	9	[4] In cases where an integrated school day has been introduced, junior level has 10–20 ppw, intermediate level an additional 6–10 ppw and senior level an additional 6–8 ppw.
Mathematics	13	15	12	[5] The integrated school day involves additional ppw as per note[4], above.
Music	4	5	2	
General subjects	18[2]	21	32	
Social subjects		(15)	(17)	
Science subjects		(6)	(15)[3]	
Handicraft	2	9	5	
Swedish	29	26	10	
Options	—	—	11	
Free activities	[4]	2[4]	5[4]	
Total	74[5]	104[5]	105[5]	

Upper secondary school

The structure of Swedish upper secondary schooling is illustrated in the table below. The table also shows the emphases of the 2-, 3- and 4-year lines of study. The lines themselves are grouped into sectors. Each sector includes lines of varying duration as well as specialised courses.

Swedish upper secondary schools are centralised to larger communities. The students usually come from several municipalities which together constitute an upper secondary school region. The large upper secondary schools are mostly what are known as general schools, i.e. they include both theoretical lines and a wide selection of 2-year vocational lines and specialised courses.

Each upper secondary school has a headmaster and one or more directors of studies. Student numbers vary between 300 and 1,500. Sparsely populated areas have special upper secondary schools which collaborate with the senior level of compulsory school and with an upper secondary school in a larger community.

The number of students per class does not exceed 30 in theoretical lines and courses and 16 in the practical vocational lines.

All lines of study may qualify the student for higher education as well as conferring a certain amount of vocational preparation. The 3- and 4-year lines mainly comprise theoretical studies of general subjects and theoretical vocational subjects. Students taking the 4-year technical line can obtain an upper secondary school leaving certificate after three years. The fourth year confers the qualification known as "upper secondary school engineering graduate". The 2-year economics, social and technical lines and the music line (provided in just a few localities) are also predominantly theoretical. Other lines are more specifically vocational and include quite extensive vocational practice together with the relevant theory.

Intake

More than 90% of the pupils completing the final grade of compulsory school apply for upper secondary school. Not all of them start immediately in the autumn, however, even if they are admitted. Some of them continue with employment they have obtained during the summer. Others opt out because they have not been admitted to their line of first preference. Also, there are increasing numbers of "mature applicants" who have acquired varying degrees of working experience instead of coming straight from compulsory school. Students can take a year off in order to acquire work experience or attend school abroad. Consequently, upper secondary school students can be anything between 16 and 25 years old and can have had widely varying experience of working life. Altogether, the students applying for admittance to upper secondary school greatly outnumber the 16-year-old population. As from 1984/85 the 16- and 17-year-olds are, however, to be given priority among the applicants.

Roughly 35% of the students take 3- and 4-year lines, more than 50% take vocational lines and slightly less than 15% take 2-year theoretical lines. The vocational lines are generally more in demand than the theoretical lines, but applicants' preferences vary from year to year.

The work of upper secondary schools

All lines of upper secondary school are concerned, in addition to personal development, with preparing students for further studies and, to some extent, for vocational activity. Owing to the large numbers entering upper secondary school immediately after compulsory school or later on, aptitudes and interests vary a great deal. The students in every line of study present a wide range of academic aptitude. The most talented students do not invariably apply for theoretical lines. Many of them prefer a vocational line because it opens the way to employment.

Sectors and lines of upper secondary school, 1984

Sector / Line \ School year	2	3	4
Arts and social sciences sector	liberal arts		
	social sciences		
	music		
Nursing, social and consumer sector	consumer		
	social services		
	nursing[1]		
	social		
Economic and mercantile sector	distribution and clerical		
	economics		
	economics		
Technical-industrial sector	clothing manufacturing		
	building and construction		
	operation and maintenance		
	electro-telecommunications		
	motor engineering		
	food manufacturing		
	process engineering		
	woodwork		
	workshop		
Technical-scientific sector	technical		
	natural sciences		
	technical		
Agricultural and forestry sector	agricultural		
	forestry		
	horticultural		
All sectors	specialised courses[2] < 2 years		

[1] Vocational line with a substantial element of theoretical studies.

[2] Specialised courses are taken on completion of compulsory schooling or its equivalent.

Advanced specialised courses come after completion of a two- or three-year line of upper secondary school or the equivalent.

Consequently, the work of each study route has to be adapted to the individual students and efforts have to be made to provide both for their vocational interests and for their varying demand for and interest in theoretical studies.

Foreign languages are compulsory subjects in all theoretical lines and many vocational ones. Students taking other vocational lines tend very often to take English as a voluntary subject, and so it is common for young Swedes to have studied English for nine or ten years by the time they leave school.

The activities of upper secondary schools have been investigated over a number of years by a Government commission. This commission has proposed thoroughgoing changes to the structure and activities of upper secondary schools. After circulating the commission's report for comment, the Government has resolved to shelve the extensive changes recommended. Instead the National Board of Education has been instructed to conduct experimental activities in accordance with the guidelines represented by the commission's recommendations. The National Board of Education has invited all municipalities with upper secondary schools to launch experimental schemes of this kind. The experiments will among other things be concerned with the sectorial co-ordination of studies in grade 1, successive specialisation and an intermediate leaving system. Closer co-ordination of upper secondary schooling with adult education and labour market training is also to be tested.

The youth guarantee

As from 1978, municipal authorities have been responsible for ensuring that all young persons between the ages of 16 and 18 who are neither attending upper secondary school nor permanently employed receive further educational and vocational orientation in conjunction with vocational practice and a certain amount of instruction, e.g. in Swedish and mathematics. This arrangement is known as the youth guarantee. The activities are usually linked to upper secondary schools but are organised relatively autonomously.

Most of the young persons requiring this type of assistance after compulsory school succeed within one or two years in finding a course of studies, an apprenticeship or a job which they can finally settle on.

Staff—co-determination and consultation

Staff structure reflects the divided sponsorship of schools. Through its local education committee, the municipality sponsors schools within its boundaries. Activities are conducted in compliance with State regulations and guidelines. The State also defines the qualifications required of teachers, headmasters and directors of studies. The salaries of these categories are paid mostly out of State grants and are fixed in nationwide collective agreements. As mentioned above, headmasters and directors of studies are appointed by the county education board, while teachers and all other school staff are appointed by the local education committee or by a delegate, usually the headmaster, acting on its behalf.

Teachers constitute the largest staff category. Junior and intermediate level pupils are taught by class teachers, though remedial and specialist teachers also take part; handicraft subjects are always taught by specialist teachers, and this is often the case with sport and sometimes with music. Teachers are trained at schools of education or the corresponding departments of universities. Junior level teachers receive 2.5 years' training, intermediate level teachers 3 years'.

Senior level pupils are taught by subject teachers and specialist teachers. The subject teachers are graduates who have received one year's practical teacher training at a school of education after graduation. Upper secondary school subject teachers receive the same training as their compulsory school counterparts. Upper secondary schools also have senior subject teachers with Ph.D. degrees or similar qualifications. Vocational teaching in upper secondary schools is provided by subject teachers with advanced economic or technical qualifications or by vocational and specialist teachers. The vocational teachers have completed vocational training and studies of vocational theory as well as acquiring long experience of their trades and undergoing teacher training at schools of education. The specialist teachers are trained at specialised colleges of various kinds, the main emphasis of their training in most cases being on the teaching of a single subject, e.g. art education, sport or handicraft.

School management staff are recruited from the various teacher categories.

Other staff categories are doctors and nurses, social welfare officers and psychologists, youth recreation leaders and school helps.

The staff organisations have by tradition occupied a powerful position in Sweden. The Co-determination Act (MBL) entitles employees' organisations to information and to opportunities of influencing impending decisions. Co-determination talks are held between the headmaster and staff representatives at school level, between the local education committee/executive municipal committee and the employees' municipal representatives, and at central, State level.

Pupils and parents are not represented in co-determination negotiations, but it is the duty of each headmaster to inform representatives of these groups of major events and decisions in school and to let them state their viewpoints concerning proposals which have to be submitted to the local education committee for approval. The most important means of giving pupils powers of co-determination and inducing them to assume responsibility, however, is that of deliberate training in the class meetings held regularly all the way from junior level to the terminal grade.

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